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Leaks Cripple U.S. Policy and Need to Be Plugged

By STANSFIELD TURNER

President Reagan has established new controls to curtail leaks of classified government information. The White House ordered officials throughout the government to get clearance before talking with reporters about national-security matters. And Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger is instituting lie-detector tests to ferret out leakers.

The various news media are not providing the public a balanced response to these commendable efforts. They are telling us that inhibitions on public servants will result in a less-well-informed press and hence a less-well-informed public, that no such system of controls has ever worked anyway, and that the government will continue to leak when it wants to for its own advantages.

What is missing is a discussion of the damage done through unauthorized leaks.

First, there is the endangering of our sources of intelligence information. We may spend billions of dollars developing a new technical system for collecting data, then give away the secret for countering it. We may endanger the life of a foreign agent who is taking risks at our request and on our behalf. Perhaps, even more important, by lessening confidence in our ability to protect our agents we reduce the probability that we will be able to recruit the agents today whom we will need five to ten years from now.

Second, we do direct damage to our foreign policy, and our military readiness, by tipping our hand or describing our capabilities. Perhaps the most significant element here is that we are often denied opportunities to take foreign-policy initiatives just because the risk of a leak is so high. In my opinion, one of the key reasons that the hostage-rescue raid into Iran did not succeed was the perceived necessity for extreme measures to prevent leaks during the planning process. Even at that, the fact that an action of some sort was under way with respect to the hostages was beginning to be perceived by newsmen by the time the raid took place.

Leaks of security informations are the single most serious handicap to our foreign policy within our government. Certainly, leaks are the greatest problem that our intelligence agencies face.

Most Presidents have had to face this issue. Some have made valiant attempts to

control leaks, and some of those attempts have been unlawful. President Reagan's approach is certainly neither doomed to failure nor unlawful. He deserves a trial period to demonstrate that his new controls will not be abused by overclassification or by selective leaks.

One reason it is worth giving the President's plan a try is that the dangers of controls are being grossly exaggerated. What do leaks accomplish for our country? They often simply advance the time at which the public will be informed and, in so doing, preempt or destroy a foreign-policy initiative. Or they release some detail of classified data that is well beyond the interest or comprehension of the general public.

For instance, when our hostages were being held in Iran, there were particular threats against those whom the Iranians identified as having been with the CIA. Two major newspapers in this country published detailed descriptions of how to distinguish a CIA person from other embassy employees, based on records that the Iranian captors held. I wrote to the editors and complained that the American public hardly needed the specifics in this instance, and that lives might be at stake. Both editors responded that it was their duty to publish such information despite its irrelevance to informing our public.

The principal argument for not discouraging the illegal practice of leaking is that someone will uncover another Watergate by this means. That is a risk, but would a set of controls such as the President has established dissuade either a Woodward-and-Bernstein team or a Deep Throat from doing what they each did?

Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein provided a valuable public service through their reporting for the Washington Post, but the popularity of investigative reporting, and of whistle-blowing, has risen too high. There is little question that the public interest today lies on the side of curbing the excesses of unauthorized leaks to which we have subjected ourselves. Let's give the President's plan a fair trial and wish him luck.

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